



Soon . . . Lagoon can turn a frown upside down

By Arnold Irvine

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When it didn't snow last fall, the ski resorts in Utah mourned the loss of thousands of dollars worth of business.

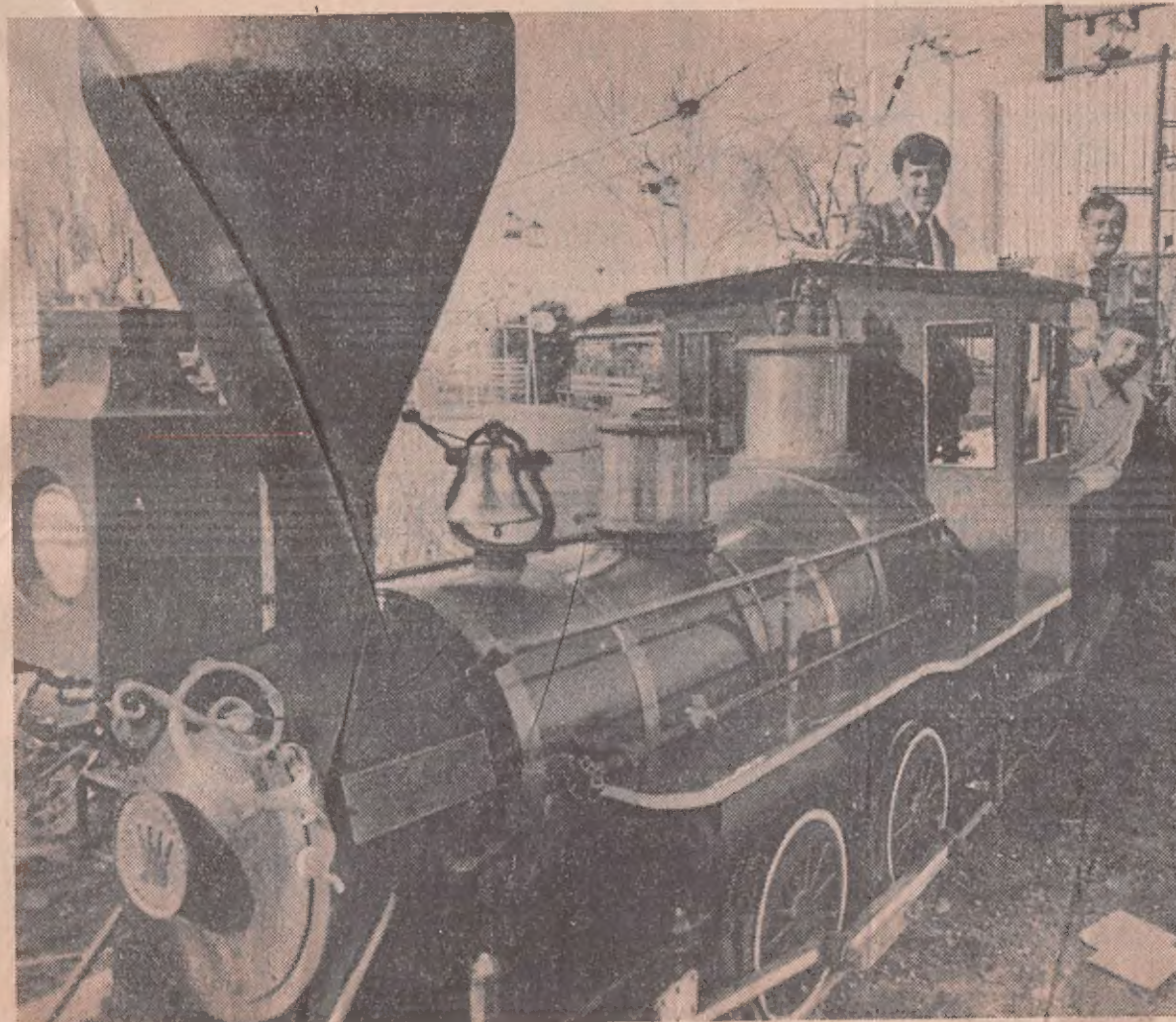
With late snowstorms and abnormally cold weather this spring, another group of recreational operators have been staring glumly at the sky and calculating the weather's toll on traffic at their fair weather fun spot.

"We're at the mercy of the weather and right now, it's killing us," complained the trio — Peter Freed, president; Boyd F. Jensen, executive vice president, and J. Clark Robinson, general manager, of Lagoon Corp.

However, the long-range outlook for the season is upbeat in spite of the weather and the current economic slump. "The over-all feeling is that during a recession, the amusement business does better than most," said Freed, relaxing in an office chair sans coat and tie.

Young-looking and trim although he admits to being pre-World War II vintage, Freed generates a youthful enthusiasm when talking about plans for Lagoon.

Right now, he's excited about a possible agreement with the Sons of the Utah Pioneers on the acquisition of Pioneer Village by the amusement company. The firm has acquired 11.5 acres of choice property just east of the park in Farmington as a site for the



Ready to fire up Wild Kingdom Train at Lagoon, from left, J. Clark Robinson, park manager; Boyd F. Jensen, executive vice president; and Peter Freed, president.

company will provide 10 acres in all for the village, Freed said.

"We want to have it ready for the 1976 Bicentennial year," he added.

The management feels the village, with its museum, pioneer buildings and ox-drawn covered wagon, will add a new dimension to the park and broaden its appeal.

The company first indulged in nostalgia a few years ago when it built the opera house and opera square with its old-time shops and restaurant. Freed himself helped design the opera house and recalled, "We searched the whole country for antiques to make it authentic. It was quite a sizable investment and we had great doubts as to whether it would make money."

"Now, it pays for itself and helps bring people to Lagoon," Freed said.

Three musical comedies are presented each season, each playing nightly for a month. The theater has a tieup with the University of Utah theater department and Robert Hyde Wilson serves as impresario.

"The reason people like Lagoon is, because we're clean," Jensen declared. He was talking about the type of entertainment as well as the condition of the premises.

"Our whole direction is to provide family-oriented entertainment," Freed added.

Many years ago, the management phased out the professional carnival-type personnel at the park and phased in the fresh, youthful

look with high school and college students staffing the operations. Most of the youngsters come from the surrounding communities of Davis County, and average between 17 and 18 years of age. The minimum age is 16.

"We have about 70 percent high school students and about 30 percent college students," said Robinson.

The company schools the summer workers in the skills required for the jobs, stressing pleasant, courteous service. Hot meals at cost are provided for the staff plus such incentives as free rides and swimming, employee of the week awards and college scholarships. Church services are held in the Opera House Sundays for workers who care to attend.

"We have three or four applicants for every job. There's no problem getting the kind of help we want," Freed said.

At the height of the season, there are as many as 550 persons working at Lagoon and the monthly payroll runs over \$130,000.

Lagoon opened for the first time this season a week ago and will continue to open weekends until the regular season begins on Memorial Day. After that the park will open daily.

The management expects to play host to a million persons by the time the season ends some time in September. About 60 percent of the patrons will come as members of groups that hold annual Lagoon outings — company employee groups, family reunions, fraternal organizations, church groups, schools, ethnic groups and many others.

"Our basic source of business is group business," said Jensen, who

is in charge of promoting group outings. He said he works with a thousand different organizations and 95 percent of the group patronage is repeat business.

"We try hard to please the groups that come to Lagoon. We provide services such as furnishing welcoming banners, paper coverings for the tables, public address systems, reduced rate tickets and sports facilities," Jensen explained.

Other promotional events sponsored by the resort include rodeos and demolition derbies.

The park changes from year-to-year as new attractions are added and old ones phased out. New this year is the Wild Kingdom Train which circles the lake, passing live llamas, buffalo, bears, a timber wolf, miniature deer, elk and a variety of birds and other animals.

The train consists of a three-quarter-size replica of an old-fashioned steam engine and several open-air cars like those that used to carry passengers to Lagoon's one-time rival, Saltair.

Also new is the Log Flume Ride with conveyances resembling hollowed-out logs in which passengers ride along a flume. It ends in a steep slide and a splash into a pond.

"The trend is away from the circle rides that make people dizzy — and sometimes ill," Freed said.

Nevertheless, the most popular ride in the park is the Roller coaster which is the oldest of all. The Skyride, installed last year, is second and Dracula's Castle rates third.

Sometimes management decisions to phase out facilities are reversed by public demand.

"We reactivated the Wild

Mouse because the comment cards we distributed to patrons showed they wanted it. We had dismantled it to make room for a new ride," Freed said.

"We also rebuilt the funhouse because of its heavy popularity as indicated on the comment cards," he added. The funhouse burned some years ago and management had decided not to replace it. Most amusement parks around the country had eliminated theirs.

"Now we're the only major park in the country with a funhouse," Freed noted.

An important function of Lagoon management is advance planning. "We're talking about 1976, right now," Freed said. Another three-quarter-size train, a new picnic area, new rides and a par three golf course are among the ideas being considered for future years by the three executives.

Although the resort operates only for a little more than three months a year, activity continues there through the other nine months. A maintenance crew of about 50 persons overhauls all of the park's equipment and installs new facilities.

"We spent \$125,000 on the Roller Coaster this year and most people won't even notice. New cars have been installed and the loading area has been re-arranged," Freed said.

Through the winter and spring, full-time gardeners have been busy in the park's greenhouses raising the thousands of flowers and other greenery that add color and beauty to the grounds.

In addition to the park's own maintenance crew, the company has had three building contractors

at work during the winter in order to get everything ready for opening day.

Carrying such a heavy overhead through the year and having to make all the profit in an all-too-short three months is a bit worrisome, Robinson admitted.

For years, Lagoon Corp. has operated the Terrace Ball Room as a balance to the amusement park business. Winter is the big season for the Terrace which caters to dances, concerts, banquets, conventions and exhibits.

Incidentally, the corporation owns neither Lagoon nor the Terrace. It leases Lagoon from the Simon Bamberger estate and the Terrace from Little America Refining Co.

As a further diversification, the firm has embarked on the development of a chain of game centers to help produce income that isn't seasonal.

The first of the centers opened at Trolley Square in December. It features an electronic shooting gallery, air hockey, foosball and video games. Nolan Bushnell, a former Lagoon employee, is one of the leading developers of the video games.)

"The centers are kind of experimental but they're promising," said Freed.

A second center has been opened in Sugar House and three more are in the plans for Ogden and Salt Lake City.

The three men directing the business are the successors of Robert Freed, who headed the firm until his death last year.

His brother, Peter, succeeded him as president. "Pete" is a World War II veteran and a graduate of the University of Utah. He has been associated with his brothers, David and Robert, in the Lagoon operation since they took the lease in 1946. Prior to 1969, he divided his time between Lagoon and other business interests.

Jensen, also a World War II veteran, has a juris doctor degree from the U. He has been a part of the Lagoon operations for 22 years. He is a member of the Murray School Board and is bishop of the Murray 20th Ward of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Robinson started working at Lagoon when he was nine years old. His job was feeding a collection of monkeys. Subsequently, he has worked at the pool, the arcade, operated games and food facilities, the picnic areas, warehouse, front office and accounting. He became the park comptroller in 1965, assistant general manager in 1971, and general manager last year.

He received his master of business administration degree at the University of Utah, where he was a member of the football team. He lives in Bountiful, where he is active in civic and church work.